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*Groupwork* Vol. 15(2), 2005, pp.108-111. © Whiting & Birch Ltd, 2005

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## Reviews

*The Mutual-Aid Approach to Working with Groups*  
*Helping People Help One Another*

Dominique Moyse Steinberg

Binghamton, NY, The Haworth Press, 2004 (2nd Edition) xvi+274pp

978 0 7890 1461 0 (hbk) US\$59.95

978 0 7890 1462 7 (pbk) US\$32.95

When I received the 2nd edition of Dr. Steinberg's book to review I expected to be reviewing a text as good as the first edition; however I was not prepared for just how good the 2nd edition would be.

The author's stated purpose for the book is to link mutual-aid theory with practical information, and she clearly succeeds in bringing together theory and practice in a way that feels effortless. The writing and use of language are beautiful, creative and the book is a joy to read. Dr. Steinberg has a unique ability to write about complex concepts in ways that make the ideas accessible to all. In addition, I was struck by her ability to blend many of the classic groupwork texts and primary source materials with contemporary research and theory.

The first chapter is an excellent overview of and rationale for the mutual-aid approach to group work. Her discussion of the dynamics of mutual aid and their implications for practice in Chapter 2 expand previous authors' work. The examples she uses beautifully illustrate the theoretical information she provides. From these first two introductory chapters the author increases one's understanding of how to purposefully set these mutual-aid dynamics in motion and provides practical 'how to' guidance on overcoming common obstacles to mutual aid. She addresses pre-group planning, group goals and norms, the worker's role, the use of time and place, individual problem-solving, authority and the role of conflict all from a mutual-aid viewpoint. In this edition she has added four chapters that specifically address common group types that have proliferated in recent years: single-session groups, short-term groups, very large

groups and open-ended groups. In each of these four chapters she describes how elements of mutual-aid can be nurtured and developed to better serve the needs of group members.

Because the book is so well written it is appropriate for many different uses. Practitioners will find this book very helpful in understanding their groupwork practice, and the book could easily be used as a textbook across the educational spectrum. The language and examples make the content accessible for para-professionals and in non-academic training. However, the theoretical base and complex concepts make it appropriate for use in higher education as well. At the end of each chapter the author provides a bibliography for further study of the ideas presented.

I have one criticism of the book. Readers of this journal may notice that the author has an almost exclusive reliance on North American literature. There is a body of groupwork literature published in the UK and elsewhere that could be used to add to this rich and wonderful book.

Though there are other excellent groupwork textbooks that comprehensively cover groupwork practice, this book focuses exclusively on mutual-aid. This in depth examination will allow practitioners to maximise mutual aid in their groups. I highly recommend it.

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*Inside Group Work*  
*A Guide to Reflective Practice*

Fiona McDermott

St Leonard's, NSW, Allen and Unwin, 2002, 225pp

ISBN 1 86508 892 7 (pbk), AUS\$35.00

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Fiona McDermott's text 'does what it says on the can'. From a practitioner's perspective, this is a very practical and accessible book. It is well written and methodical, with ten chapters taking the reader from the embryonic stages of planning a group (group purpose) through theory, leading a group, forming a group, the life of the group to a finally section on 'Doing "good" group work'. Every chapter concludes with a helpful summary.

McDermott began her research for this text by consulting with practitioners, and has used their experiences to illuminate many of the points she makes. The result is a text that integrates theory and practice in a meaningful, connecting way, which for a practitioner who feels somewhat distant from theory - and I suspect that I am not alone in this - makes encouraging reading. In this task, McDermott takes five perspectives: the group as a power base; the group as system; the group as a container of individuals; the group as container of properties; and the group as a site for meaning construction. From these five perspectives, which 'overlap and interplay' (p.53), she gives some examples of how this construction links to different types of groups - for example, social action groups, self-directed, psychoeducation, mutual aid, psychotherapy groups. She stresses the importance of connecting theory to purpose, including postmodernism and critical theory.

The chapter on leading groups analyses the complexities of group leadership and addresses these not only in the context of power, but also references the different styles and types of leadership. Another useful chapter deals with the management of conflict and difficult behaviors that can be manifest in groups. Most of us struggle with conflicts that emerge within groups, and this chapter addresses these tough situations in practical ways.

However, for me the pivotal chapters are the two that address the concept of 'thinking group'. Groupwork requires a wide range of skills, and comes from a process of experience and reflection,

underpinned by theoretical and practical knowledge. McDermott argues that in order for groupworkers to work well, their practice has to be approached from a 'cognitive and emotional frame encompassing the group-as-a whole' (p.80) and goes on to detail how this can be achieved. This concept takes group facilitation to another level. By advocating the development of the skills in relation to 'thinking group', McDermott enables the worker to analyse the raw material of the group's behaviour and link this to the group's process and task. 'Thinking group' has applications for any group, whether an educative program or a therapeutic group, making this an important concept that can enhance groupwork practice. As a social work manager, for me the concept of 'thinking group' opens up an area of huge potential in terms of applying this concept in the workplace.

A theme which runs throughout the whole book is the energy of groupwork. McDermott is passionate about the subject and clearly captures the vibrancy and potential for groupwork as a medium for change - with all its challenges. This is evident in the way she weaves the 'rich and fascinating' comments provided by 'people who lead, facilitate or participate in groups' (p.49) into her text – and how she links these 'conversations' and her interest in groups as 'a site for the construction and reconstruction of meaning' (p.51).

As I read this book, I often found myself thinking 'If only I had read this before starting my journey into groupwork'. I think this is a valuable text not only for new practitioners - for whom it will be an excellent introduction to groupwork theory and practice - but also for experienced practitioners as an inspirational introduction to 'thinking group'.

**Phillip Lewis**

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